



## Highlighting “Blue Communities”: Collective Action for Local and Global Common Pool Resource Institutions

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### **Blue Communities, a Collective Action for Local and Global Common Pool Resource Institutions**

In this essay we present a summary of two panels held at the Bern 2016 Regional conference on the Blue Communities Project. The Blue Communities (BCs) Project was created to help community activists and local leaders protect the water commons – our shared water resources and services. A joint initiative of the Council of Canadians and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, in 2011 the City of Burnaby in British Columbia became Canada’s first BC; since then, others have followed. In 2013, the City of Bern, Switzerland, and the University of Bern became the first Blue Communities outside Canada. Paris followed suit in March 2016. BCs commit themselves to principles that help them respect the rights to water and sanitation in line with their specific context and duties, and to supporting the ability of other communities to do so. These principles concern local governance, on the one hand, and participation in shaping the higher national and international levels that frame local governance, on the other.

#### **1. Blue Communities, a collective action for self-declared principles of resource governance: Potential for and limitations of supporting institutional frameworks and**

#### **public–public partnerships**

The first panel addressed the local level of governance and how it interacts with the national level. The panel took the form of transdisciplinary action research.

The starting point was a reflection on water resources in relation to landscape and ecosystems. These exercises showed how water resources are interlinked with ecosystem services and depend on their integrity<sup>1</sup>. It also demonstrated the importance of integrating into governance and management supporting services that enable resources to regenerate. Ecosystem characteristics – specifically related to the integrity of the water cycle – are genuinely in the common interest. Any type of water use must consider socioecological interrelations and the potential impact of the water use, in order to defend human rights and sustainable futures<sup>2</sup>.

BCs address these interrelations and increase awareness of the significance of individual behaviour as well as of institutions enabling sustainable resource governance and management. BCs promote common-pool resource (CPR) institutions, defend global commons, and support adequate governance at the local, national, and global levels.

We focused on experiences of collective action by BCs in Canada and Switzerland,



including the University of Bern<sup>3</sup>, and explored the potential for scaling up collective action and increasing impact. For the University of Bern as a BC, we also discussed the meaning of tertiary education and research and how they contribute to sustainable futures. Indeed, the BCs initiative's potential for impact is strongly determined by consciousness and thus by education, as well as by the national and international institutional setting and its support of CPR institutions (cf. panel 2).

The trends of economic globalization, resource overuse, and pollution make it more difficult to defend water as a local and global common. The prevalence of bottled drinking water as a commodity is increasing worldwide, and the human right to water remains precarious. In Canada and Switzerland, defending CPR water mainly depends on the level of awareness and on local concerns. Local and national institutions securing common water resources in the future are under risk, and currently lack the necessary resources and support to be truly effective. BCs play an important role in enhancing local awareness and fostering international public-public partnerships in order to support institutional development. But international development cooperation agencies show little interest in enhancing public-public partnerships and institutions for CPR, and lack concepts for the global commons.

Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs declined to participate in this panel, saying it did not match its priorities. SDC<sup>4</sup> focuses on technical innovation, infrastructure, and public-private partnerships, thus contributing to the commercialization of water and water services.

At the national level, Brazil presented the approach of having the Ministry of Public Affairs<sup>5</sup> support the defence of CPR interests. Indeed, such support could counterbalance the dominant power of international companies when it comes to CPR, and contribute to the defence of human rights and global commons.

In conclusion, through collective action BCs are firstly responding to the challenge that water must be considered a local and global common resource, due to the interrelationship of the water cycle and the ecosystems, and due to its multiple services to humanity. Secondly, BCs cannot limit their activities to the local and national context, but have to address global challenges and contribute to building up institutions for sustainable governance. Thus, research on commons is urged to develop concepts for global common resource governance and institutions.

## **2. Is the right to water and sanitation supported or undermined by the new mega trade agreements TTIP, TPP, TISA, and CETA?**

The second panel addressed the problem of policy coherence in the context of international trade agreements. A starting point was that the BCs Project is based on the right to water and sanitation, and was created to protect public access to water as a CPR. In recent years, there has been growing debate on whether new mega trade agreements such as TTIP, TPP, CETA, or TISA<sup>6</sup> – which are under negotiation or close to being implemented – would support or undermine the right to water and related common-property regimes. The panel hence explored the extent to which mega trade agreements might



impact on water governance and on initiatives such as the BCs. While it became obvious that more financial investment in water governance is urgently needed in many places, right-to-water related stakeholders have little confidence that the trade and investment deals will contribute positively to the solution. This is basically due to their bias towards the privatization of water governance, instead of strengthening the role of the government in satisfying basic water needs. However, it remains contested to what extent the private sector should play a role in securing water infrastructure, and whether investment treaties – if formulated in a balanced way – are a necessary tool to secure responsible investments in the sector. Trade and investment treaties that are more balanced would not only protect the rights of investors, but also require them to respect the rights of local inhabitants to “their” water resources and to respect national strategies for sustainable development. If these rights are not respected, the rights of the investor would not be protected either. Hence, the debate links up to the more general debate on more sustainable trade and investment agreements.

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## Notes

1. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005. *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Synthesis*. Island Press, Washington, DC.

2. The concept of sustainable futures relates to sustainable development (UN World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) but avoids the term development in order not to recall development paradigms but to acknowledge the need for societal transformations (Agenda 2030).

3. [http://www.unibe.ch/university/portrait/self\\_image/sustainability/blue\\_university/index\\_eng.html](http://www.unibe.ch/university/portrait/self_image/sustainability/blue_university/index_eng.html)

4. <https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Water>

5. The Brazilian Public Prosecutor’s Office (PPO) is one of the most important institutional innovations stemming from the 1988 Constitution. The prosecutors not only have autonomy, but also tools and wide-ranging powers. These characteristics have allowed the PPO to play more than a traditional role in applying public actions concerning criminal matters together with the Judiciary branch, thus transforming Brazilian prosecutors into significant political players. (Fábio Kerche 2014 *O Ministério Público no Brasil: relevância, características e uma agenda para o futuro*. In: *REVISTA USP* • São Paulo • n. 101 • p. 113-120 • março/abril/maio 2014, 115)

6. TTIP: Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership; TPP: Trans-Pacific Partnership; CETA: Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement; TISA: Trade in Services Agreement

## For further information, visit

- <http://canadians.org/bluecommunities>

- <http://bluecommunity.ch/>